

7 KEY CHINESE VALUES: CONFUCIANISM AND ITS LEGACY

Many Chinese beliefs were formed early, as civilization emerged along the Yellow River before 1000 B.C.E. One such belief stressed the importance of harmony in and with nature around the concept of the Way which described a balanced and restrained way of life. More formal systems of thought developed later, in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C.E., during a divided and troubled period of Chinese politics. Various thinkers sought means to shore up a strong political system or live without one. Of the resulting philosophies or religions, Confucianism proved the most durable and significant.

Deemed by students a "Divine Sage," Confucius (Kong Fuzi) (ca. 551–479 B.C.E.) was founder of a humanistic school of philosophy that offered Zhou China a social and political ethos derived from idealized values of the past. As a remedy for the political chaos of his age, the famous teacher abandoned the decadent aristocratic code and offered in its place an ethical system focused on individual moral conduct, propriety, ritual, and benevolence. Arguing that the foundations of good government and the well-being of society rested on individual ethical behavior, Confucius urged the emperor and his assistants, the *junzi* (gentlemen), to provide moral examples for society at large. Confucius believed the appointment of modest, wise, polite, and virtuous gentlemen scholars was essential for good government and that this was the best means for eliminating the immorality and amorality that undermined law and order. Idealistic gentlemen could restore the conditions prevailing under the early Zhou dynasty, whose government Confucius viewed as a perfect form. In the selection from the *Analects*, which is a collection of sayings attributed to the "Master" and set down long after his death, one finds his views of gentlemen. Because scholars doubt that Confucius put his ideas into writing, it is impossible to determine whether these views are authentically his own or those of later Confucianists.

Confucian theories of government were adopted as state ideology during the Han dynasty [200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.], and many of his concepts proved fundamental to Chinese

Selection I from *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. and anno. by Arthur Waley (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1938), 85, 90–91, 104–106, 121, 131, 152, 163, 167, 177–178, 181, 187–188, 197, 199, 200, 205–207, 233. Permission granted by the Arthur Waley Estate.

Selection II from David K. Jordan "Folk Filial Piety in Taiwan" in Walter H. Slot ed., *The Psycho-cultural dynamics of the Confucian family: past and present* (Seoul: International Cultural Society of Korea, 1986) 47–106.

philosophy more generally. From the following passages, consider what the main interests and values of Confucianism were. Compare these with leading value systems—typically religious systems—in other ancient and classical civilizations. How do they compare with Judaism or with Hindu or Buddhist concepts developing during the same time period in India?

The second selection is from the next period in world history, *not* the classical period; and, of course, it was not written by Confucius. The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars was written by Guo Jujing during the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368). Guo was renowned for his own filial piety and used the occasion of the death of his father to publish the stories about other devoted sons. The book was widely sold in China until it was attacked by the Communist regime as part of its campaign against tradition, and new copies were issued once more in the 1990s. Many Chinese were and are familiar with the stories, even though the collection was scorned by Confucian intellectuals. The passages suggest how Confucian values might be translated into a family ethic as well as into politics and how the values might also be popularized as Confucian ideas became increasingly deep-rooted in Chinese culture during, but also clearly well beyond, the classical period.

THE SMALL ANALECTS

The Master said, If a gentleman is frivolous, he will lose the respect of his inferiors and lack firm ground upon which to build up his education. First and foremost he must learn to be faithful to his superiors, to keep promises, to refuse the friendship of all who are not like him. And if he finds he has made a mistake, then he must not be afraid of admitting the fact and amending his ways.

Zigong asked about the true gentleman. The Master said, He does not preach what he practises till he has practised what he preaches.

The Master said, A gentleman can see a question from all sides without bias. The small man is biased and can see a question only from one side.

The Master said, A gentleman in his dealings with the world has neither enmities nor affections; but wherever he sees Right he ranges himself beside it.

The Master said, A gentleman takes as much trouble to discover what is right as lesser men take to discover what will pay.

The Master said, A gentleman covets the reputation of being slow in word but prompt in deed.

The Master said, A gentleman who is widely versed in letters and at the same time knows how to submit his learning to the restraints of ritual is not likely, I think, to go far wrong.

The Master said, A true gentleman is calm and at ease; the Small Man is fretful and ill at ease.

At home in his native village his manner is simple and unassuming, as though he did not trust himself to speak. But in the ancestral temple and at Court he speaks readily, though always choosing his words with care.

At Court when conversing with the Under Ministers his attitude is friendly and affable; when conversing with the Upper Ministers, it is restrained and formal. When the ruler is present it is wary, but not cramped.

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When the guest has gone, he reports the close of the visit, saying, "The guest is no longer looking back."

On entering the Palace Gate he seems to shrink into himself, as though there were not room. If he halts, it must never be in the middle of the gate, nor in going through does he ever tread on the threshold. . . . While, holding up the hem of his skirt, he ascends the Audience Hall, he seems to double up and keeps in his breath, so that you would think he was not breathing at all. On coming out, after descending the first step his expression relaxes into one of satisfaction and relief. At the bottom of the steps he quickens his pace, advancing with an air of majestic dignity. On regaining his place he resumes his attitude of wariness and hesitation.

[The Gentleman] must not sit on a mat that is not straight.

When the men of his village are drinking wine he leaves the feast immediately after the village-elders have left.

Sima Niu asked about the meaning of the term Gentleman. The Master said, The Gentleman neither grieves nor fears. Sima Niu said, So that is what is meant by being a gentleman—neither to grieve nor to fear? The Master said, On looking within himself he finds no taint; so why should he either grieve or fear?

The Master said, The gentleman calls attention to the good points in others; he does not call attention to their defects. The small man does just the reverse of this.

The Master said, The true gentleman is conciliatory but not accommodating. Common people are accommodating but not conciliatory.

The Master said, The true gentleman is easy to serve, yet difficult to please. For if you try to please him in any manner inconsistent with the Way, he refuses to be pleased; but in using the services of others he only expects of them what they are capable of performing. Common people are difficult to serve, but easy to please. Even though you try to please them in a manner inconsistent with the Way, they will still be pleased; but in using the services of others they expect them (irrespective of their capacities) to do any work that comes along.

The Master said, The gentleman is dignified, but never haughty; common people are haughty, but never dignified.

The Master said, It is possible to be a true gentleman and yet lack Goodness. But there has never yet existed a Good man who was not a gentleman.

When the Master said, He who holds no rank in a State does not discuss its policies, Master Zeng said, "A true gentleman, even in his thoughts, never departs from what is suitable to his rank."

The Master said, A gentleman is ashamed to let his words outrun his deeds. . . .

The Master said, A gentleman is distressed by his own lack of capacity; he is never distressed at the failure of others to recognize his merits.

The Master said, A gentleman has reason to be distressed if he ends his days without making a reputation for himself.

The Master said, "The demands that a gentleman makes are upon himself; those that a small man makes are upon others. . . ."

The Master said, It is wrong for a gentleman to have knowledge of menial matters and proper that he should be entrusted with great responsibilities. It is

wrong for a small man to be entrusted with great responsibilities, but proper that he should have a knowledge of menial matters.

The Master said, from a gentleman consistency is expected, but not blind fidelity.

Confucius said, There are three things against which a gentleman is on his guard. In his youth, before his blood and vital humours have settled down, he is on his guard against lust. Having reached his prime, when the blood and vital humours have finally hardened, he is on his guard against strife. Having reached old age, when the blood and vital humours are already decaying, he is on his guard against avarice.

Confucius said, There are three things that a gentleman fears: he fears the will of Heaven, he fears great men, he fears the words of the Divine Sages. The small man does not know the will of Heaven and so does not fear it. He treats great men with contempt, and scoffs at the words of the Divine Sages.

The Master said, He who does not understand the will of Heaven cannot be regarded as a gentleman. He who does not know the rites cannot take his stand. He who does not understand words, cannot understand people.

GUO JUJING *FILIAL EXEMPLARS*

1. *SHE BIT HER FINGER AND PAINED HIS HEART*

Zēng Shēn of the Zhōu dynasty was called Zī-yú (=Disciple of the Master). He was extremely filial to his mother. Shēn once went to the mountains to gather firewood. A guest came to the house, and his mother had no arrangements [to entertain him]. She longed for Shēn, who did not return. Then she bit her finger, drawing blood. Suddenly Shēn felt a pain in his heart. He shouldered the firewood and returned home. Kneeling, he asked his mother what the matter was. His mother said: "A guest came unexpectedly. I bit my finger to alert you." Later, verses praised him, saying:

His mother has just bitten her finger,
When her son's heart aches uncontrollably;
He shoulders his wood to return and is not too late;
The tie between mother and child [lit: bones & flesh] is so deep.

2. *HE HIRED OUT TO SUPPORT HIS MOTHER*

Jiāng Gé lived in the later Hàn dynasty. His father died when he was young, and he lived alone with his mother. The times were troubled and chaotic, so, carrying his mother on his back, he fled. Again and again they encountered bandits who wanted to force him to join them. But Gé burst into tears and told them that he bore his mother with him [whom he had to support]. The bandits could not bring themselves to kill him, and at length he reached Xià Péi [in Jiāngsū province]. Impoverished, naked, and barefoot, he hired himself out as a laborer to support his mother. His mother was able to have all she desired, and there was no end to what he gave her. A verse praises him thus:

He carries his mother out of danger;
When destitute brigands assault him many times,
He tells them his grief and is able to avoid them;
By his labors he supports his mother.

3. HE LET MOSQUITOES CONSUME HIS BLOOD

When Wú Měng of the Jin dynasty was eight years old, he was very filial towards his parents. The family was poor, and the bed had no mosquito net. Every night in summer mosquitoes in droves nibbled at their skin and sucked their blood without restraint. Although there were many, Měng did not drive them away, lest in leaving him they bite his parents. So great was his love of his parents! A poem praises him:

On summer nights without a mosquito net,
When mosquitoes are many he dares not wave them off;
They gorge themselves on his flesh and blood,
And thus he avoids their bothering his parents.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What were the proper goals of life according to Confucius?
2. What was the Confucian definition of a gentleman? Why did Confucianism place so much emphasis on manners and ceremony?
3. Did Confucius judge human nature to be good or bad? What was his attitude toward human emotions?
4. What social structure did Confucianism imply? What were the key social classes, and how did they differ?
5. In what ways was Confucianism not a religion?
6. How does Confucianism compare with the political values and systems developed in Mesopotamia and Persia (Chapters 2 and 5)? What are the distinctive features of Confucianism as a basis for political life?
7. What kind of family values did Confucianism suggest? How did these relate to broader political values?
8. Why would Confucian intellectuals look down on books like *Filial Exemplars*? How did such books nevertheless demonstrate a Confucian legacy?

ESSAY SUGGESTIONS

- A. What qualities in Confucianism and its popularization explain why Confucian values proved so desirable in Chinese culture? Why would ordinary people as well as "gentlemen" assimilate their values?
- B. How did Confucian thinking define and justify social inequality? How could it be used to condemn social protest but also, at times, to justify protest?